

Sensationalism in Hamlet

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Abstract

The paper is intended for research and advance studies on Shakespeare. It will analyse Hamlet from a different perspective. Main focus is to have a comprehensive and modern interpretation of William Shakespeare so that the graduating students can grasp wider view on issues ever unexplored. It will also focus on dialogues and interactions of Hamlet with special reference to the sensationalism and villainy of other major characters. There are instances of revenge motives, treachery, and manipulations. The main discussion will therefore, concentrate on the position, vulnerability, and confusion in a personality of high rank. The dilemma of being powerful: you have resources but you have restrictions on utilizing that power. There are also some instances of balancing act between responsibility and relationships.

Introduction

1

Of the inconsistency of our actions, Montaigne observes that 'irresolution is the most apparent and common vice of our nature'. The mystery of irresolution is nowhere as vivid as found in the characters of Hamlet. Sometimes, we seem to ignore the irresolution and choose to trace a different path of the state of sluggishness on the part of the protagonist. Having all the resources i.e., strength, means, intention, drive; one seems to have failed to react against hypocrisy, tyranny and injustice. It's an illusion- a dilemma which is yet to be solved by the modern reader. In Hamlet's own language:

To be, or not to be, that is the question-
Whether 'tis nobler in the mind to suffer
The slings and arrows of outrageous fortune,
Or take arms against a sea of troubles,
And by opposing end them. (Act-III, scene-i)

All these inconsistencies and irresolution are the result of deception and duality in the making of ever corruptible minds. Claudius was in a drive to prove himself

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innocent all the way to the end of the play but he was a classical example of a villain. To bury his misdemeanors, he overreacts in every situation that would prove him otherwise. He was found indifferent to the pains and agony of Hamlet who had difficulty in understanding the behavior of his mother and uncle. The corrupted speech of Claudius made it doubly suspicious for it all seems impossible for Hamlet to accept a lie. Because, Claudius admitted that he is sad and happy at the same time. What would cause a man to be happy while he loses his brother? Then, why would he be sad if he is already happy? Perhaps, he is happy because he has become the king. And, he is sad because he has lost his brother in the process. His own speech reveals the truth. The duality is surfaced in the double edged irony of Claudius's speech:

Have we, as 'twere with a defeated joy,
With one auspicious and one dropping eye,
With mirth in funeral and with dirge in marriage,
In equal scale weighing delight and dole, (Act-1, Scene-ii)
This is the real hypocrisy in a brother who would do anything to grab power.

The reason behind Hamlet's inconsistent behavior lies in every twist and turn of his mother's behavior as well. He finds it difficult to cope with his mother's overjoyed reaction to a situation where he expects his mother to show some respect to the departed soul of his father. Hamlet does not expect too much from his mother. But Gertrude, his mother takes the demise of Hamlet's father very casually. She comments: "Thou know'st 'tis common, all that lives must die, Passing through nature to eternity". (Act-1, Scene-ii)

Hamlet's claim is that he can not play with emotion which is a trend of the day. He observes that people veil themselves with certain moods and clothes to hide the truth, which is simply impossible for Hamlet to cope with. He simply can not get rid of the pain that possesses his mind so much. We can not express our true feelings through outward gestures. He explains:

But I have that within which passes show-
These but the trappings and the suits of woe. (Act-1, Scene-ii)

The trappings and the woe in Hamlet's mind are the direct results of Claudius's mischievous behavior and deception. Claudius believes in forced empowerment which is the cause of major dislocation in the country. Though he claims to be the spokesman of "Unforced accord", he never practices what he says. Hamlet terms the murder as "Gross in nature". The gruesome actions in the play give rise to the concept of sensationalism and melodrama. The calculated guesses of an uncle

makes it all devious and mournful. Claudius's action could only be compared with beasts. He rejects any norm of human empathy towards his kinsman. Hamlet opines:

O God, a beast that wants discourse of reason
Would have mourned longer-married with my uncle, (Act 1, Scene- ii)

In another instance, he doubts the whole love affair between his mother and uncle and he expresses his disgust at it:

"By what it fed on, and yet within a month-

Let me not think on't; frailty, thy name is woman- (Act-1, Scene-ii)

2

The magic in the play begins with the appearance of Hamlet's father's ghost. The idea of introducing the ghost is a blessing from omnipotent God to assist Hamlet in resolving the murder mystery. At the same time it equates the status of a man to the level of God. Man acts as a demigod who decides for himself. The sequence creates a sensation, an exhilaration, a ray of hope, and a kind of poetic justice. We can feel the thrills in the following speech of Hamlet:

That thou, dead corse, again in complete steel
Revisits thus the glimpses of the moon,
Making night hideous, and we fools of nature
So horribly to shake our disposition
With thoughts beyond the reaches of our souls?
Say, why is this? Wherefore? What should we do? (Act-1, Scene-iv)

Hamlet is bewildered and confused at the sight of his father's ghost. He is looking for possible resolution to this unwanted situation. It all seems unnatural and incomprehensible to weak hearts. The ghost definitely appears with a purpose; it is to reveal the secret of the crime. The ghost of Hamlet's father commands: "Revenge his foul and most unnatural murder" (Act-1, scene-v). The ghost terms the murder as, most foul, strange, and unnatural action.

The force and impact of speech achieves its full potential in the ghost's humanly attitude and kingly grandeur. The statement weighs the commandment of god and demands sympathy from an earthly being. It is the bond between natural and the transcendental. Hamlet's father is in a drive to establish justice and rule of law in

his country. He prophesies war against the villain who is none other than his own younger brother. So, he discloses:

A serpent stung me. So the whole ear of Denmark
Is by a forged process of my death
Rankly abused; but know, thou noble youth,
The serpent that did sting thy father's life
Now wears his crown. (Act-1, Scene- v)

This is a clear message to the followers of the king to raise a war against tyranny and injustice. The consequence of this command is unprecedented for Hamlet becomes even more charged with emotion to take revenge. The scars in Hamlet's mind have driven him to the state of madness. Out of remorse and sadness he kills Polonius, father of Ophelia. He had his revenge. As it is revealed in the conversation between Hamlet and his mother:

Hamlet (draws his sword): How now, a rat? Dead for a ducat, dead.

(Kills Polonius)

Polonius (Hiding behind the window curtain): Oh, I am slain!

Gertrude: Oh me, what hast though done?

Hamlet: Nay I know not, is it the king?

Gertrude: Oh what a rash and bloody deed is this!

Hamlet: A bloody deed? Almost as bad, good mother, as kill a king and marry with his brother. (Act-III, Scene- iv)

The murder turns out to be a blunder because Polonius was not intended to be murdered. The aftermath of this killing makes Hamlet's life even more complicated; Ophelia goes crazy after losing her father and Hamlet loses her as a consequence.

The next person to be censured is Gertrude. She is repeatedly warned by Hamlet against his uncle. Hamlet could not accept the treason and deceit on her part. It doesn't suit the modest and grace of a queen to forget her husband so fast. It is believed that the leadership is an honor bestowed on us by the God himself. So, it cannot be cheated or robbed of anyone. And, the act of becoming a leader by espionage, aggression or murder is not viable. The whole group of aristocrats are on trial of Hamlet's sensible assumption on their insensibilities. He thinks that one's position and stature make him/her blind to his/her own faults. She/he seems to ignore the most obvious feature of common sense. Hamlet explains:

(Eyes without feeling, feeling without sight,
Ears without hands or eyes, smelling sans all,
Or but a sickly part of one true sense
Could not so mope) (Act-III, Scene- iv)

The abomination of Hamlet goes on to hurt Gertrude. She has to go through the pain and agony as she is a partner in an act of crime. However, she knows nothing about the crime being committed against her beloved. She cannot take anymore for it shatters her beliefs, pride, and respect for the corrupted king. She can now wait for the inevitable consequence of this vicious crime. To her utter dismay, she accepts the fate that is to follow the rest of her life. She terms the crime as “grained spots” in the soul. It all feels like a knife cutting her soul. As she explains:

Oh speak to me no more.
These words like daggers enter in my ears.
No more sweet hamlet. (Act-III, Scene-IV)

Gertrude’s utterance proves the innocence of Hamlet’s mother in the crime. She is fighting with herself and she has had a difficult time to accept the fact that a brother can kill his own brother to possess power, wealth, and beauty.

3

A crime of this magnitude can only be resolved by divine intervention. Shakespeare does not take any chance to leave the matter only to human faculty and power. He knows that the crimes committed by the rich and powerful would only vanish in the air if any earthly being tries to resolve it. This is why he calls for help from the supernatural to create sensation and credibility on the issue. The gravity of the matter can only be weighed if compared with primitive desires. The crime sequence has got a direct relationship with the beliefs cherished in The Old Testament i.e., “Sin leads to death”. Shakespeare as a profound believer in the Bible could easily attribute the Biblical allusions to a particular event of the play. In this case, we know that it is the prerogatives of the prophets to learn things through dreams. If Hamlet is given that special power to communicate with God directly he must be deemed as someone very special. He is guided, warned, loved, and taught by the ghost of his father. It does not occur in the life of an average person. The case is serious, sensational, and something that demands close attention from the readers of the text.

Without divine intervention, Hamlet would never be able to convince his mother to betray against his uncle. He says: “I must be cruel only to be kind”. (Act-III, Scene-IV)

It indicates that to save his mother Hamlet had to be cruel to her. Hamlet could win his mother and get the full assurance to pursue his plan. His mother promises:

Gertrude: Be thou assured, if words be made of breath,
And breath of life, I have no life to breathe
What thou hast said to me. (Act-III, Scene-IV)

Now that the game turns out to be in Hamlet's favour he can easily manipulate the whole situation. Shakespeare is in a drive to find the devil's match by introducing supernatural sensation. Hamlet has to turn himself a devil to fight against a devil. There is little he could do to fight the odds. Hamlet cannot fight corruption and deceit with all his kingly gestures. He is of noble birth. So, his activities must suit his stature. For this reason, he can not rush to judgment. He needs to be a criminal to censure a criminal. Initially, it is difficult for Hamlet to accept this gruesome act and butchery at the top level of monarchy. He cannot cope with the bloodshed but eventually he gets used to it and makes it all his habit to be a criminal. The first in line is Polonius, father of Ophelia. He suffers a lot, fights against his own conscience, argued with relatives before he can turn himself a partner of the devil.

Hamlet can now establish himself as a perfect player of the game. He utters:
But I will delve one yard below their mine
And blow them at the moon. Oh 'tis most sweet
When in one line two crafts directly meet. (Act-III, Scene- IV,)

Things get out of control when Hamlet decides to take revenge of his father's death. Claudius terms it as madness whereas Hamlet takes the whole issue as his principal duty towards his father, conscience, and the country at large. As a man of high stature, Hamlet's crime needs to be guarded for it would bring all the discredit to the ruling class. So, Hamlet is fortunate to enjoy the impunity of the monarchy while he could invest all his energy to concentrate on his action.

An action against Hamlet has never been an easy task. In a condition like Danish society where every action of monarchy is secretive, illusive, and private matter, we cannot expect a fair judgment. When it comes to kings and queens, it is simply unimaginable to indulge in their private affairs. Law is mere a play tool for the rich and powerful. The reason behind all these is not legal but more an issue of emotion and love towards monarchy. In the Elizabethan time, kings were treated as demigods who seemed to possess divine power. Obviously, once in a while they would put their power in evil use. In such cases, laws are revised and leniency would be commonplace. Hamlet is a dignified prince and he holds ample power and good names to upset any plan of his uncle Claudius. So, Claudius and his associates had to be cautious about any action against Hamlet. According to Claudius:

Yet must not we put the strong law on him;
He's loved of the distracted multitude,
Who like not in their judgement, but their eyes;
And where 'tis so, th'offender's scourge is weighed,
But never the offense.(Act- IV, Scene- III,)

Claudius runs out of options for he cannot fight a divinely inspired human being who is the rightful owner of the Danish throne. He tries his best to manipulate Hamlet to go to England so that he can have him killed on the way. He goes on to pursue the worse possible measure against his own nephew.

Power corrupts the Danish empire and the different kinds of relationships. So, to cure it Shakespeare needs to introduce desperate tricks. The only possible solution to this situation is more aggressive bloody action. Both the parties belong to the same family. Still they couldn't resolve their unresolved issues. So, a final onslaught is inevitable. There are two possible grounds for Claudius's action. First, the queen loves Hamlet so much that he is never out of her sight. Secondly, Hamlet enjoys a substantial amount of popularity among his subjects. These two factors can easily annihilate the whole Danish empire.

To reach a culmination in the play, Hamlet is fueled against his temperament and character. Hamlet is made to believe the extraordinary power he is capable of delivering. He is allowed to reflect on his own inaction and a possible consequence of the crime. Shakespeare cannot allow crime to continue further. And, Justice must be rendered. For that reason, bloodshed and sensationalism need to be introduced. In the process, Hamlet is trying to find out the reason for his inaction:

How all occasions do inform against me,
And spur my dull revenge! What is a man
If his chief good and market of his time
Be but to sleep and feed? A beast, no more. (Act-IV, Scene -IV)

Hamlet's rage continues further to infuriate the sluggish temperament of the Prince. Perhaps, it would be much easier for him to render justice on others while he is not personally involved. Avenging on his own father's killers has never been an easy task. Being the Prince Hamlet is bound to show his pomp and grandeur. He has to come down to the level of common man and feel the sadness and joy of general mass. The aristocratic class would have little experience in the common people's livelihood. In most cases they would spend time in luxury and entertainment. The lifestyle of monarchy prohibits any revolt within the family structure because most of the members are guarded by excessive forces.

4

Hamlet is astounded by the multiplicity of the problem: first, it would mean ignoring the existing law and jurisdiction. Secondly, raising a fight against himself i.e., his own family. It would mean the act of running a parallel administration within the monarchy. In addition to that he inherits a very higher level of conscience. He is highly dignified prince who can never accept the gross crime committed against his father. And, inaction on his part would mean disrespect to his ancestry and present stature. He is driven by intense pain and grudge to take revenge on the criminals. He also recognized the events which would have serious

consequences. The vulnerability of a prince is nowhere as stringent as in Hamlet.

Hamlet had to decide on the possible repercussions of a crime. He has to do it fast. As he puts it:

How stand I then,
That have a father killed, a mother stained,
Excitement of my reason and my blood,
And let all sleep, while to my shame I see
The imminent death of twenty thousand men. (Act IV, Scene IV)

Here is the consequence of a possible war. Hamlet wants to be sure before taking any action for he is a responsible man. His principal job is to protect his countrymen, not have them killed. So, if he raises a war against the monarchy it must be justified.

On the contrary, Leartes, the best friend of Hamlet is infuriated by the event of murder of his father. The unwanted crime also drives his sister Ophelia crazy. The events ultimately lead her to kill herself. Her brother blames Hamlet for the mishap. He now resolves to take revenge against Hamlet. Actually, the situation forces Hamlet to act like insensitive, reckless, and irrational person. He proclaims his love for Ophelia in the following fashion:

Hamlet: I loved Ophelia; forty thousand brothers
Could not with all their quantity of love
Make up my sum. What wilt thou do for her? (Act-V, Scene-1)

The death of Ophelia creates a common cause for both Hamlet and Leartes to be weary and lonely. At last, both of the close friends are united in defeat. They have found their sole reason to sort it out between them. Shakespeare, in this instance tries to draw an analogy between the love of a brother and that of a potential lover. Finally, Hamlet comes out victorious in this competition.

In addition, the plot reaches the even ground: both Hamlet and Leartes lose their fathers. A fight between these two friends would make the revenge motive more viable and effective. Claudius devises his plan i.e., staging a game in such a fashion so that it all appears like an accident. In an effort to resolve the dispute between Leartes and Hamlet the king asks for an apology from Hamlet. In an apology, Hamlet acknowledges:

And when he is not himself does wrong Laertes,
Then Hamlet does it not, Hamlet denies it....
His madness is poor Hamlet's enemy. (Act- V, Scene -II)

Hamlet's effort is always there to get things in order even though he is not in control of divine power. It is not meant to be peaceful where a deliberate crime is committed. He has complete trust in god and believes that things can only happen if heaven permits.

Conclusion

Shakespeare deliberately renders a situation in which characters enjoy full freedom to explore things beyond their limit. The drama is designed to amuse and startle the readers through frequent exciting action. The reason behind all these sentimentality and melodrama is to keep the audience active all along. For Shakespeare always wants to get rid of boredom found in the plays written by his contemporary dramatists. He wants to get out of the standard dramatic style of Elizabethan times. And, he applies most of his efforts in creating that "Catharsis" among his audience. He does it all by repetitive sensational hammering of logic and arguments.

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